

Personal Narratives: Wilfred Robert Brunner/John Ryan

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December 6, 1980-January 18, 1981

The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

A related sensibility rather than any similarity of style unites Wil Brunner and John Ryan, the two artists selected for the second exhibition in the Corcoran's on-going Washington series. They both exhibit a distinctive originality and an innovative and extremely atypical format in comparison to the art currently being created on the Washington scene. It is for this more than for any other reason that I selected them for this current presentation.

The paintings of both artists (Ryan prefers to call his pieces paintings even though they are drawings and collages on paper) contain a narrative quality; however, the narrative is only portrayed to the extent that it is implied or suggested—it is never firmly stated. In many instances, it is not until the viewer has read Ryan's title or Brunner's label, which he conveniently writes on the canvas, that one can fully understand the depicted imagery. Both artists mix a beguiling simplicity and awkwardness with highly personal symbolism and each has a distinct respect for tradition. It is an interesting exercise to locate the similarities of two such disparate artists.

The images in both artists' work are, of course, the dominant features of the paintings. However, it is the range of color utilized by both Brunner and Ryan that first strikes the viewer; color draws one into the pieces. Both artists employ an acutely chromatic style of painting, while being accomplished draughtsmen. Brunner's painting career began in 1973 with works exploring the unlimited possibilities of color. He would play with abstract bars of color working to equalize and balance them with the elements of surface and shape; in so doing, the painting itself became very physical. Brunner has continued to emphasize the painterly qualities of his work—revealing an exquisite and intense color sensibility—possibly encouraged by the objects surrounding him on a daily basis at The Phillips Collection, where he worked from 1971-78. For instance, in *3 Apples and an Orange*, 1980, one can clearly see and feel his juxtaposition of pure vibrant color into separate zones. The tensions created by the tone and hue are electrifying; he contrasts the delicate nuance of the fruit with the highly saturated field of the ground. The entire surface of the canvas is charged with color.

By 1975, Brunner's work began to change as he found that he was bored with the idea of painting referring only to itself. After a trip to Lake Superior in Ontario, on which he saw the immense Agawa Rock with its American Indian motifs and writing, the idea of combining words with images became exciting to him. The artist had always kept notebooks full of newspaper fragments and his own drawings and doodles. In fact, before his Ontario trip, Brunner was beginning to concentrate increasingly on his drawings. Thus, by the time of his first one-man exhibition at Hardart in Washington, D.C., in 1975, subject matter—however subjective or oblique its reference might be—began to emerge.

At first, the imagery revolved around lists of words, often inspired by slides that he was sorting for his job at The Phillips Collection. Then Brunner's subject matter began to expand and incorporate personal events as well as art historical themes. In 1977, Brunner began to paint still lifes, a genre that is still prevalent in his art. Fascinated by the formal elements of Braque's late still lifes in The Phillips, Brunner decided to try painting one. Yet his motivation for painting a still life is slightly different than for most artists; it is no longer merely an academic exercise or a means to precisely and mechanically reproduce objects. Instead the objects portrayed point beyond themselves, giving shape to the artist's ideas about them. For Brunner, though not necessarily for the viewer, the image acts as the vehicle to carry on a process of thinking.

Brunner's use of materials bears special note. After seeing the Brice Marden exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 1975, the artist decided to experiment with mixing beeswax and turpentine with oil paint. In order to get the beeswax to a pliable state, he melts it. However, this is the only point at which the material is heated, distinguishing it from encaustic. The beeswax, which is used as a medium, enables Brunner to control the surface texture. The underpainting consists of acrylic and gesso; the lettering is charcoal and when he is finished Brunner sprays a light varnish on the surface.

This Particular Example, 1980, was created after Brunner's recent trip to Canada. Once back in his studio, the artist

wished to record his experiences on canvas: with *This Particular Example* he succeeded in doing so. It is similar to a traveler's diary in that it succinctly recalls to him his trip. The label and the object both literally and figuratively describe his experience in Canada. There is an interplay between the emotive content of the image and its formal structure. For not only does Brunner want to evoke or narrate a personal event; since he is primarily a painter, he also strives for a balanced composition and exciting design. Brunner employs various textures and surface qualities in order to insure that the painting won't be read simply as an illusionistic object. Textural areas are played off each other, creating a mysterious sense of space while also re-asserting the sensuous, tactile qualities of the surface. The placement of the inscription, the kayak, and the two textured areas successfully balances a potentially chaotic composition.

Laurie's Oranges, 1980, was inspired by a student in one of the artist's classes, while *Light in the Studio*, 1980, came about after a long summer of moving in and out of studios, finally, in exasperation, setting up his easel at home. *Rothko at Yale*, 1979, not only contains the humor and sharp wit prevalent in so many of these pieces, it also conveys the underlying ambiguity of all of these canvases. This painting was inspired by a photograph of Mark Rothko, found in the Guggenheim Museum's retrospective catalogue, on which Rothko wrote, "I do not look like this." Brunner's canvases do not really look like the actual objects or people portrayed; all of the elements have been shifted around. Brunner has taken Rene Magritte's painting of a pipe with the inscription *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (This is not a pipe) written below the object, one step further. He does not merely give a literal depiction of the image; instead, all of the objects portrayed are directly related to personal events and occurrences, and the artist, by the obvious recording of the activity of his own hand, differentiates his painting from mechanically reproduced imagery.

John Ryan is even more difficult than Brunner to characterize briefly, because much of his motivation, inspiration and imagery is so highly personal, both self-generated and inter-referent. Thus, in order to describe his work, one can merely express one's response to it and

hope that one's understanding of his style and technique coincides with his own. I don't believe I have met another artist who gains as much sheer pleasure from his art. In fact, Ryan quite openly states that he draws to entertain himself, though he wishes to wake up his fellow beings to nature and the world around. Ryan asserts: "My pen is my soul. My work is my fun." But his is a strongly prejudiced view in its incredible optimism. Nothing is depicted in a depressing or cynical light; instead, his jewel-like creations capture a sense of joy and celebration of life.

Ryan records his impressions of his environment, his daily encounters and experiences. Like Brunner, he tends to eliminate detail; he wishes to capture the mood, the atmosphere, the essence of the scene. In his portraits, conveying the sitter's personality is of utmost importance; there is no interest in exact replication, as with a camera. In the field, Ryan works in a very small format, which allows him to catch people off guard, to work on the sly. Once back in the studio, the artist re-creates the scene, adding images from his own imagination or subconscious. The same is true with his choice of colors. The colors are arbitrarily chosen and are not true to the scene. He works by intuition and instinct which allows him to retain a great sense of spontaneity. In fact, he has compared his quick, hieroglyphic line to the slash of a samurai. Even though the format is small, the paintings are intensely animated.

The scenes are not bizarre, lurid or menacing; instead, they take on a quality of mystery that we might associate with a child's imagination. Ryan's use of dark, sensuous colors in *Hypnotize*, 1979, *Mr. Ree*, 1980, and *Nosferatu*, 1980, create an unexplainable, enigmatic mood. Ryan's technique of putting a drawing under the faucet so that the watercolor and gouache run together adds an additional feeling of enigma. Two examples of this technique and atmosphere are *Casanova*, 1979, and *Memory*, 1979. Often it is not until the viewer reads the descriptive title that the scene can be fully understood.

Several of Ryan's paintings are consciously witty, revealing an impish sense of humor. *Swimming Pool*, 1979, with its bathing beauty about to take the plunge, and *Natural Curiosity*, 1980, which if one looks closely at the tree on

the far left becomes a self-portrait, strikes this chord. As does much Japanese art, Ryan's serves to uplift our spirits, to revitalize us.

Much successful art demands that viewers delve into their own pasts so that they can totally experience a work. Ryan provokes and entices such memories from us; his work operates on levels both of immediacy and nostalgia. It is our responsibility to complete the painting, to be entertained. Each painting is stimulated by a real thing that was observed by the artist and that gave him some pleasure. The oil, gouache, watercolor, ink, paint, glass, wallpaper, etc., are the vehicles that Ryan use to present his ideas and perceptions about his world.

Many of Ryan's paintings begin as illustrations for the Washington Post Book World or its dining and wine guides. The pieces in this exhibition though are more developed; he expands the common caricature and enlarges its scope with ideas and techniques derived from art history: automatic drawing; expressionistic color; fragmented space; child-like drawing; unself-conscious qualities inherent in primitive art. To this, he infuses his imagination, his inner vision, his love of experimentation and his tremendous admiration for the period before World War II. His figures are "natty"; they conjure up visions of Basil Rathbone and The Thin Man. They not only catch a certain mood, they touch back to a time thirty or forty years ago. Mere caricature and illustration do not stimulate such responses; even though the paintings may capture the artificiality of the scene, they do not exist on a superficial level.

One is aware of Ryan's ambiguous position in the realm of art as it becomes difficult to place or categorize him. This exhibition will not determine the nature of a Ryan illustration published in the Washington Post next week or next year. But by presenting sixty-seven paintings in a museum setting, it tries to deal with and even question basic premises and definitions of high art.

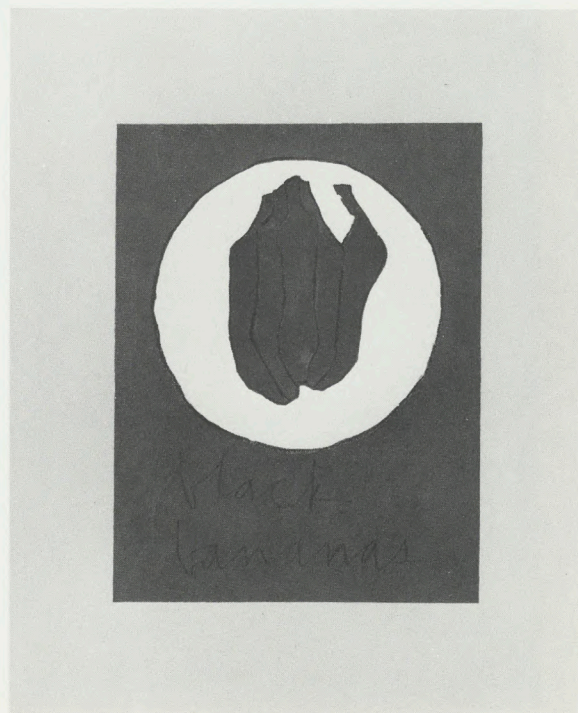
Both Brunner and Ryan have examined the means and methods of the artists they have most admired in the past. They have tried to balance a modern sensibility

against historical sources. They emphasize the presence of the artist's hand by creating highly individual images that cannot be confused with reality. Both have created poignant and gentle works as they have wittily questioned and often parodied modern art. Perhaps they embody some of the issues that will be expanded on and pursued in Washington art in the eighties.

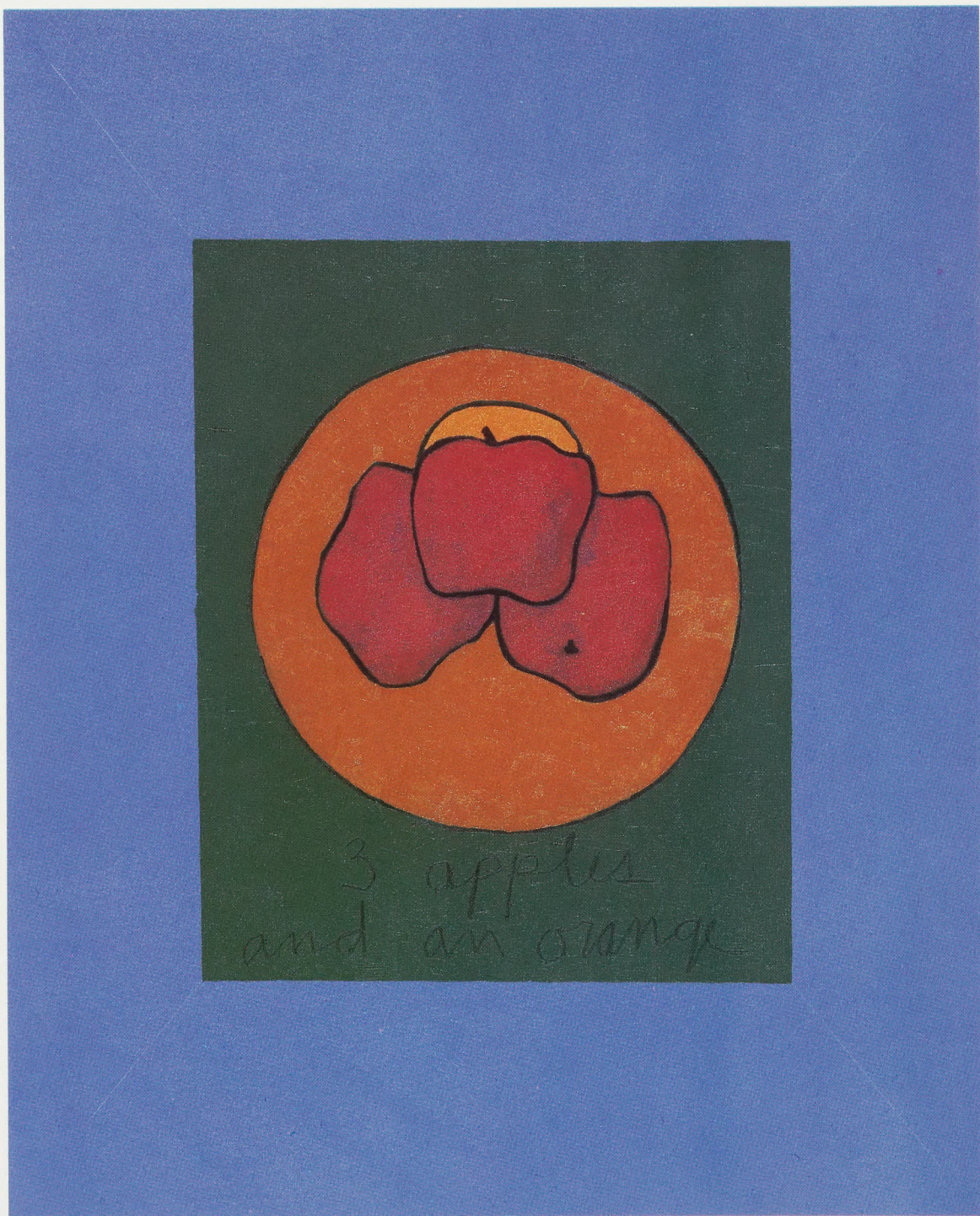
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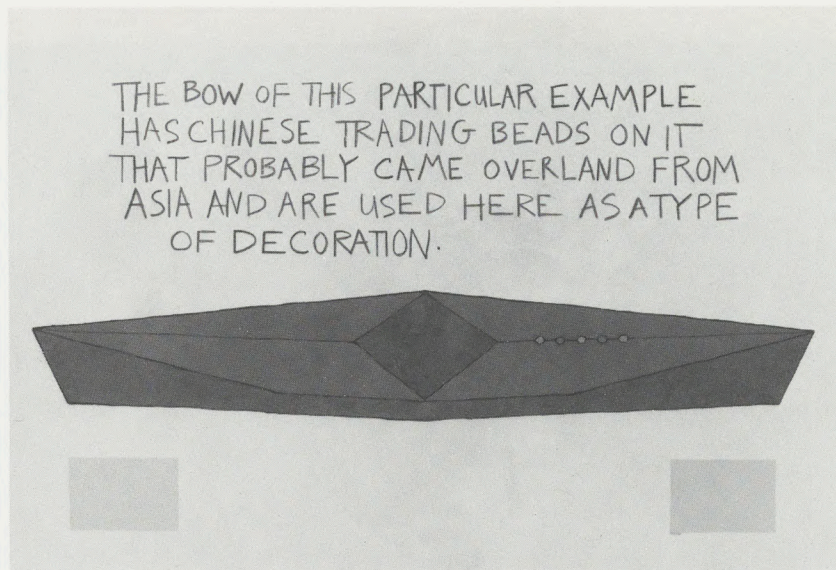
29. *Hypnotized*. 1979



3. *Black Bananas*. 1980



9. 3 Apples and an Orange. 1980



8. *This Particular Example*. 1980

WILFRED ROBERT BRUNNER

Chronology

Born Washington, D.C., September 18, 1948.

Studied The Walden School, Washington, D.C., 1964-66.

Studied Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania; B.A., 1970.

Worked at The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., 1971-78.

Studied The George Washington University, Washington, D.C.; M.F.A., 1973.

Visiting Lecturer, Marymount College of Virginia, 1975-present.

Lecturer, Montgomery College, Takoma Park campus, 1979-present.

Individual Exhibitions

Washington, D.C., Hardart, February 8-March 1, 1975.

Washington, D.C., Fraser's Stable Gallery, March 24-April 23, 1977.

Washington, D.C., Barbara Battin Fiedler Gallery, April 24-May 23, 1980.

Group Exhibitions

Washington, D.C., The Phillips Collection, "Artists on The Phillips Collection Staff," December 18, 1976-January 12, 1977.

Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Community Gallery of Lancaster County, "5 Washington Artists," August 7-28, 1977.

Washington, D.C., Barbara Battin Fiedler Gallery, "Gallery Artists," May 2-26, 1978.

Washington, D.C., The Phillips Collection, "Wil Brunner, Cynthia Griffith, William Ryan," December 16, 1978-January 17, 1979.

Washington, D.C., Washington Project for the Arts, "Emerging Washington Painters: A Selection," September 4-29, 1979.

Arlington, Virginia, Arlington Arts Center, "Elements of Art: Texture," November 2-25, 1979.

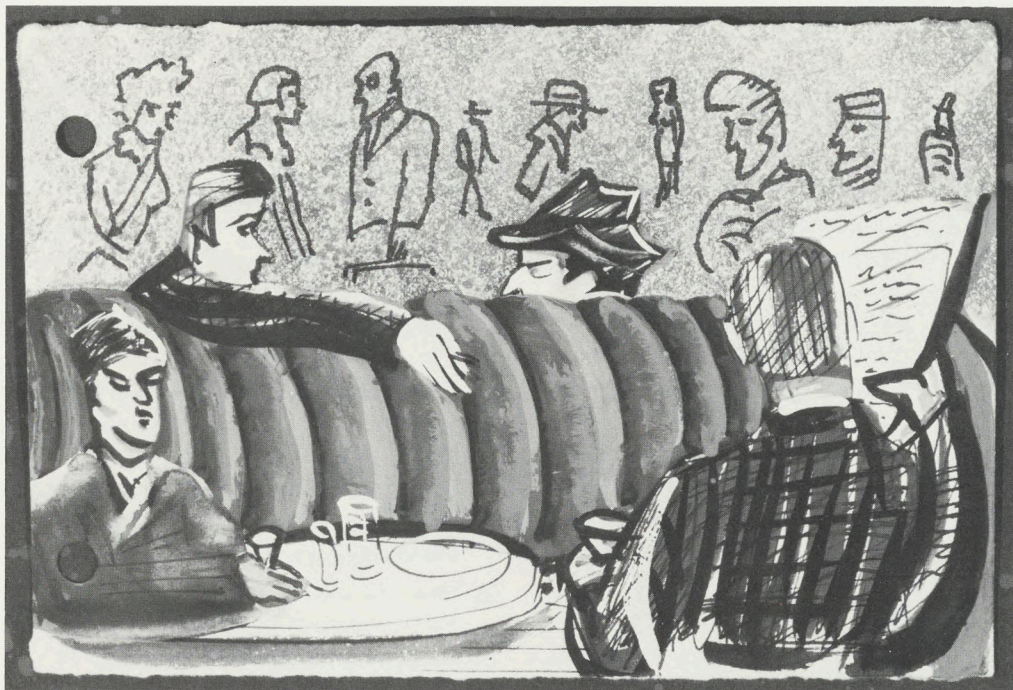
Takoma Park, Maryland, Montgomery College, "Washington Artists from the Barbara Battin Fiedler Gallery," November 5-December 4, 1979.

New York City, 80 Washington Square East Galleries, New York University, "Small Works: 4th Annual Competition," January 29-February 22, 1980.

Baltimore, Maryland, The Baltimore Museum of Art, "The 1980 Maryland Biennial Exhibition," December 14, 1980-February 1, 1981.



64. Mr. Ree. 1980



36. *The Red Banquette*. 1979

JOHN RYAN

Chronology

Born Bethesda, Maryland, May 19, 1949.

Lived in Tokyo and Yokohama, Japan, 1958-61.

Studied Richmond Professional Institute, Richmond, Virginia; B.F.A., 1971.

Traveled to Fez, Morocco, 1971. Awarded three-month grant by Moroccan government.

Traveled to Spain, France, Italy, Switzerland, Holland, 1972.

Lived in New York City, 1973-76. Worked as commercial artist at Village Voice.

Moved to Washington, D.C., 1976.

Makes illustrations for the Washington Post Book World, 1977-present.

Makes illustrations for the dining and wine guides in the Washington Post Magazine, 1979-present.

Group Exhibitions

Washington, D.C., Studio Gallery, "New Members' Show," January 8-February 2, 1980.

Washington, D.C., Hubert H. Humphrey Building, "Regional Arts '80: Works on Paper," June 5-July 18, 1980. Traveled to: Queens, New York, Jamaica Arts Center, August 1980; Cincinnati, Ohio, The Arts Consortium, September 15-October 15, 1980. Organized by the Kuumba Learning Center, Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C., Market V Gallery, "Five Washington Artists," August 15-September 14, 1980.

Catalogue of the Exhibition

Wilfred Robert Brunner

1. *Rothko at Yale*. 1979
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 48 x 36"
2. *Strays*. 1979
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 48 x 72"
Collection Will Franzheim, Washington, D.C.
3. *Black Bananas*. 1980
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 30 x 24"
4. *Laurie's Oranges*. 1980
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 30 x 24"
5. *Light in the Studio*. 1980
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 60 x 72"
6. *New Moon at My Window*. 1980
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 60 x 72"
7. *Prayer Sticks*. 1980
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 36 x 36"
8. *This Particular Example*. 1980
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 48 x 72"
9. *3 Apples and an Orange*. 1980
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 30 x 24"
10. *Visitor with Night Windows*. 1980
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 60 x 72"

John Ryan

11. *Automatic*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 4 x 5"
12. *The Bar*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 4 x 6"
13. *Bar Maid*. 1979
Mixed media on glass, 4 x 3"
14. *Blue Mirror Francais*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 4 x 6"
15. *Breakfast*. 1979
Watercolor with violet pencil on paper, 4¼ x 7"
16. *Casanova*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 5½ x 8½"
17. *Chapel*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 4 x 5"
18. *China Doll*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 4 x 6"
19. *Chinese Pharmacy*. 1979
Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 4 x 4"
20. *Experienced Only*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 4 x 6"
21. *Fascination*. 1979
Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 8 x 5"
22. *Femme Fatale*. 1979
Mixed media on glass, 4½ x 3"
23. *Femme Fatale Chinois*. 1979
Watercolor on paper, 6 x 5"
24. *Front Row*. 1979
Watercolor and pastel on paper, 5½ x 8½"
25. *Full Moon*. 1979
Watercolor, gouache, ink and wallpaper on paper,
5 x 4"
26. *G.B.* 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 5 x 4"
27. *Hong Kong*. 1979
Watercolor, gouache and collage on paper, 4½ x 8½"
28. *House Beautiful*. 1979
Ink on magazine photograph, 6 x 8"
29. *Hypnotized*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 8 x 5"
30. *Is this Love?* 1979
Watercolor on paper, 6 x 5"
31. *Memory*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 5 x 4"
32. *Meridian Hill*. 1979
Watercolor on paper, 4 x 6"
33. *Nan King*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on gessoed paper, 6 x 8"
Collection Gregory Lalley and Kadah Stackhouse,
Washington, D.C.
34. *Natural Curiosity*. 1979
Mixed media on glass, 4 x 6"
35. *Neon Cool*. 1979
Mixed media on glass, 4½ x 3¼"
36. *The Red Banquette*. 1979
Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 4 x 6"
37. *Red Curtains*. 1979
Watercolor, gouache and ink on newspaper, 9 x 8½"
Collection Maynee Brulon, Richmond, Virginia
38. *Sholls' Colonial Cafeteria—Demolished*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 4 x 5"
39. *Sholls' New Cafeteria*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 4 x 6"

40. *So Oriental*. 1979
Watercolor, gouache and charcoal on paper, 5½ x 4"
41. *The Spa*. 1979
Watercolor, ink and collage on paper, 4¾ x 3"
42. *Street Scene (Winter)*. 1979
Mixed media on glass, 6 x 8"
43. *Sydney-Heidelberg-Maryland-London-Tokyo*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 4 x 6"
44. *Tai Tung*. 1979
Watercolor on paper, 5 x 7"
45. *10th and Constitution*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 4 x 5"
46. *Tree Man*. 1979
Mixed media on glass, 4 x 2½"
47. *Tree Man*. 1979
Watercolor and ink on wood, 6¼ x 4"
48. *Two Drinks*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 5 x 4"
49. *Unknown Passenger*. 1979
Oil on glass; watercolor and gouache on paper, 6 x 12"
50. *Window*. 1979
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 3¾ x 4¼"
51. *Alchemist*. 1980
Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 7 x 4"
52. *Beauty and Charm*. 1980
Gouache, ink and collage on paper, 8 x 5"
53. *Cafe*. 1980
Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 4 x 6"
54. *Chinese Cocktail*. 1980
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 4 x 6"
55. *Crow*. 1980
Watercolor, gouache, ink and gold paint on paper, 4½ x 4"
56. *Draper and Lebeaux*. 1980
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 8 x 5"
57. *Feline Fatale*. 1980
Watercolor on paper, 7 x 5"
58. *The Forgotten Man*. 1980
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 4 x 6"
59. *Ink Blot*. 1980
India ink on paper, 8 x 5"
60. *Ink Blot*. 1980
India ink on paper, 8 x 5"
61. *I Remember Reality Review*. 1980
Watercolor and gouache on paper; each 6½ x 4½"
62. *J. and N.* 1980
Watercolor and blue pencil on paper, 4 x 6"
63. *Janus*. 1980
Mixed media on paper, 3 x 1½"
64. *Mr. Ree*. 1980
Watercolor, gouache and charcoal on paper, 7½ x 5¼"
65. *Natural Curiosity*. 1980
Oil on wood, 12 x 12"
66. *Norma Lisa*. 1980
Watercolor on paper, 7 x 5"
67. *Nosferatu*. 1980
Watercolor, gouache, ink and pastel on paper, 6 x 4"
68. *Samurai*. 1980
Watercolor and ink on paper, 5½ x 4"
69. *Skyline*. 1980
Mixed media on glass, 6¼ x 4¾"
70. *Somnambulist*. 1980
Mixed media on paper, 3 x 2"
71. *Space Lab*. 1980
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 4 x 6"
Collection Edward L. Ryan, II, Washington, D.C.
72. *Spectre*. 1980
Mixed media on paper, 6 x 4"
73. *Steam*. 1980
Watercolor and ink on paper, 4 x 6"
74. *Stray Dog/D.C.* 1980
Watercolor on paper, 4 x 6"
75. *Tavern*. 1980
Watercolor and ink on paper, 4 x 6"
76. *Totem*. 1980
Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 8 x 5"
77. *Trio*. 1980
Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 8 x 5"

Each work has been lent by the artist, unless otherwise noted.

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